

Friends in Conflict: Paul and Barnabas

Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 23, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Acts 9:26-30

²⁶When he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. ³⁰When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Acts 15:36-41

³⁶After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. ³⁹The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Today, in the final sermon of our Friendship and Faithfulness series, we consider the friendship of Paul and Barnabas, and the conflict that nearly drove them apart.

Friendships are sometimes difficult. They can be threatened by disagreements and hurt feelings. Paul and Barnabas were close friends and co-workers empowered by God’s Spirit. Nonetheless, after many years they would come to a crisis that would threaten to blow their friendship apart.

*Barnabas*¹

Barnabas was originally from Cyprus, a large island in the eastern Mediterranean about 60 miles west of Syria. By Jesus’ day there was a substantial Jewish population on Cyprus. Barnabas was a Jew from the priestly tribe of Levi. It may have some priestly business that first took him to Jerusalem, the home of the temple and the center of the priestly system. In any event, not long after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Barnabas embraced Jesus as Messiah and Lord, even selling a field that he owned and giving the money to the apostles for distribution (Acts 4:36-37). Barnabas went on to become a leader in the Christian community in Jerusalem.

Barnabas met Paul soon after Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus.² When Paul, the former persecutor of Christians, made his way to Jerusalem, Barnabas rose to defend him (today’s first passage from Acts). Despite Barnabas’ defense, there was so much heat on Paul that he headed for

Luke and the Book of Acts

Luke accompanied Paul during some of his missionary work. Later, Luke wrote a two-volume account of Jesus’ life and the creation of the Christian church. We refer to the two volumes as the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Together, they tell a story that spans more than six decades, from the birth of Jesus to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome in 62AD. The two volumes comprise 25% of the NT.

In addition to narrating the early years of Christianity, Acts also contains several important and lengthy speeches: e.g., Peter’s speech on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), Stephen’s speech to the Jewish leaders just before his martyrdom (Acts 7), and Paul’s speech to the Christians in Ephesus before his final return to Jerusalem (Acts 20).

¹ Barnabas’ birth name was actually Joseph. He was given the name “Barnabas” by the Apostles; it meant “Son of Encouragement.”

² Briefly, three years or so after Jesus’ resurrection, Saul, a Pharisee, was on his way to Damascus to round up Christians when he was visited by the risen Christ, temporarily struck blind, and became a follower of Jesus. As a Christian, Saul would come to be known by his Greek name, Paul.

his hometown of Tarsus (in southern modern-day Turkey) while Barnabas continued his own work in Jerusalem.

Barnabas and Paul would meet again about six years later in Antioch (also in southern Turkey). Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire and home to a large Jewish population. Fleeing persecutions in Jerusalem and Judea, some Greek-speaking followers of Jesus had headed to Antioch. Luke records that it was in Antioch that disciples of Jesus were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Because some of the new Christians in Antioch were from Cyprus, the leadership in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to keep tabs on things. Though Barnabas was pleased with what he found, he needed help. So he turned to Paul and asked him to come to Antioch. For a year, Barnabas and Paul worked together in Antioch, even collecting some financial assistance for the Christians in Judea which the two men personally took to Jerusalem. They returned to Antioch afterwards and prepared it to be the Christian “base of operations” for the missionary effort westward.

The missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul and John Mark

In 46AD or so (more than ten years after Barnabas first defended Paul in Jerusalem), the Holy Spirit and the church leaders commissioned both men for a new initiative (Acts 13:2). In this, they would be joined by Barnabas’ cousin, John Mark. Over the next three years, they would travel to Cyprus and then throughout Asia Minor preaching Christ and founding Christian communities.

Barnabas and Paul’s relationship changed during this journey. For the first ten years of their friendship, Barnabas had been Paul’s defender and mentor. He had been the “senior” of the two in the growing movement. But during this long missionary journey, Paul took on the dominant role. Despite this change in roles and the tensions that probably resulted, Paul and Barnabas worked hard and endured much for the sake of the gospel. After completing their work in Asia Minor, the two men returned to Jerusalem where, together, they would argue successfully that Gentiles did not have to obey Jewish law, such as circumcision, in order to become Christians.³

The friendship is threatened

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with a copy of a letter from the council in Jerusalem. Together, they “taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord” in Antioch. Then Paul suggested it was time for them to check up on churches they had founded during their missionary journey together. Barnabas was all for it . . . but there was a problem. Paul didn’t want to take John Mark with them again because, in Paul’s view, John Mark had bailed out on them.⁴ Paul had no interest in taking someone he deemed unreliable. But John Mark was Barnabas’ cousin and Barnabas insisted that John Mark accompany them. Paul would not relent and as Luke writes, “the disagreement became so sharp that they parted company” (from today’s second scripture passage). Barnabas took his cousin with him and headed for Cyprus. Paul took another friend, Silas, and headed back to the young churches in Asia Minor before going on to Greece.

Luke never mentions Barnabas again; all his attention is on Paul’s missionary work. However, writing to the Christians in Corinth in 54AD or so, Paul speaks of Barnabas as a fellow apostle who, like Paul, had foregone the financial compensation to which they were entitled (1 Cor 9:6). Writing to the Colossians, Paul even has nice things to say about John Mark (Col 4:10)! Paul and Barnabas might have had a falling out, but they were both Christians. They understood that in Christ, our friendships must transcend transient disputes and hurt feelings. In all his letters, Paul insisted that Christians embrace unity and harmony in the body of Christ. Christian friendship is modeled on a covenant and, like marriage, it is an aspect of our discipleship. Even though Paul and Barnabas had a passionate and even bitter argument over John Mark, we can be confident that each man would have found his way back to peace and good will toward the other, even as their work took them in two directions.

³Whether or not Gentiles would have to be circumcised and otherwise keep Jewish law in order to be Christian was a raging controversy at the time and necessitated a large meeting in Jerusalem to decide the issue in about 49AD (Acts 15). The Council decided against requiring that the converts be circumcised.

⁴According to Luke, John Mark had “deserted” them in Pamphylia mid-way through the journey.

Daily Bible Readings

(more passages about Paul and Barnabas)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Acts 4:32-37 The first mention of Barnabas.	Day 2 Acts 11:19-30 Barnabas, Paul, and the church in Antioch
Day 3 Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas begin their missionary journey.	Day 4 Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas visit Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and return to Antioch
Day 5 Acts 15 The Council in Jerusalem regarding Gentile converts	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Two Bible Academy Audio Courses are Available!!

Two of my Bible Academy courses are now available on CD: *Introducing the Old Testament* and *The Power of the Prophets: from Moses to Jesus*. Both courses were recorded live during the Winter 2004 Bible Academy session. Each course is an 8-CD recording of all eight weekly lectures. All the class materials can be downloaded on the web at www.standrewccl.org. We've also packaged a few CD sets with copies of all the handouts.

Scott Engle

Available in *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore, & also the Library

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Stay friends with someone long enough and you'll run into some rough patches. The trouble could take many forms but getting through it with the friendship intact usually calls upon the power of forgiveness and setting aside one's pride.

In your experience, what sorts of problems do friendships run into? What role do you think forgiveness plays in getting rocky friendships back on track? Why is true forgiveness so difficult for us? Have you ever lost a friend because of your own pride . . . or because neither of you were willing to be the first to bury the hatchet? How can we get better at forgiving? How do we go about learning that forgiveness is something positive, not a sign of weakness?

As in most things Christian, putting friendship in the context of discipleship changes our understanding. Just consider the NT images of Jesus as friend. The words "friend" and "friendship" appear at critical moments in John's Gospel. For example, in John 15:12-17, Jesus instructs his disciples that they are to love one another and that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." This makes waiting for your friend to apologize first seem rather petty! Jesus goes on to say that he calls the disciples his friends because he has confided to them everything that God the Father has confided in Jesus.

Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for his friends ought to shape our understanding of Christian friendship and to increase our confidence that Paul and Barnabas were able to overcome their bitter dispute. Discuss ways in which the example of Christ can reshape your own friendships.